US embassy in Tel Aviv closed

TEL AVIV, Dec 31: US Ambassador to Israel Edward Walker ordered the temporary closure of the American embassy in Tel Aviv on Thursday after receiving a specific threat, an embassy spokesman said.

"The embassy received a credible and specific threat and as a result the ambassador thought it prudent to close the embassy today (Thursday) while we investigate with the appropriate authorities," embassy spokesman Larry Schwartz said.

On grounds of sensitivity, Schwartz refused to say whether the threat came from an individual or an organization or whether it targeted specific embassy staff or the building itself.

He said he could not confirm a report on Israel Radio that an anonymous caller had warned of an impending bomb attack.

Witnesses said Israeli police were posted outside the embassy and that a team of Israeli sappers had conducted checks of vehicles parked in the vicinity.

"The embassy's action is consistent with actions the US government has taken in recent weeks in view of the heightened level of threat in the region," Schwartz said.

In mid-December the State Department ordered 40 US embassies in Africa to close as a precaution, citing possible reaction to US military action in Iraq and continuing threats in the region.

Washington has also ordered the departure of dependents and some diplomatic personnel in Israel and Kuwait due to the tensions in the Gulf.

An embassy source estimated the closure would only affect embassy activities on Thursday. The embassy was already due to be closed on Friday for the New Year's Day holiday.—Reuters